



CYGNUS ATRATUS.

Black Swan.

- Black Swan*, Philip's Voy., p. 96.—White's Journ., p. 137.—Lath. Gen. Hist., vol. x. p. 224.
Anas atrata, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 834.
— *plutonia*, Shaw, Nat. Misc., pl. 108.
Black Swan of Van Diemen, D'Entrecast. Voy., 8vo, vol. i. p. 140. pl. ix.
Shavian or Black Swan, Penn. Outl., vol. iv. p. 130.
Cygnus atratus, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 18.—Eyton, Mon. of the Anat., p. 97.—Less. Man. d'Orn. tom. ii. p. 407.—Vieill. Gal. des Ois., tom. ii. pl. 286.—Less. Traité d'Orn., p. 629.—Benn. in Gard. and Menag. of Zool. Soc., vol. i. Birds, p. 45.
Chenopsis atrata, Wagl. in Oken's Isis, 1832. p. 1234.—G. R. Gray, List of Gen. of Birds, 2nd Edit. p. 93.—List of Birds in Brit. Mus. Coll., Part iii. p. 131.
Le Cygne noir, Cuv. Règne Anim., tom. i. p. 529.
Mul-go, Aborigines of New South Wales.
Gól-jak, Aborigines of Perth.
Mál-lee, Aborigines northward of Perth.
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THE first notice on record respecting the existence of the Black Swan occurs in a letter written by Mr. Witsen to Dr. M. Lister about the year 1698, in which he says, "Here is returned a ship, which by our East India Company was sent to the south land called Hollandia Nova;" and adds that Black Swans, Parrots and many Sea Cows were found there. In 1726 two were brought alive to Batavia, having been procured on the west coast of Australia, near Dirk Hartog's Bay. Our celebrated countryman and navigator Cook observed it on several parts of the coast, and from that time to the present it has attracted the attention of every traveller in Australia, and been noticed by most authors who have written upon its natural productions; still, all that has hitherto been placed upon record have been mere notices of its existence, unaccompanied by any information respecting its habits and economy, or the extent of its range; and my account will fall far short of what the historian of so noble a bird ought to be able to give; for our knowledge of it is still very limited, and must necessarily remain so until geographical research has cleared our path, and made us more intimately acquainted with the portions of the country it principally inhabits.

I may state then that the Black Swan has not been found out of Australia, and that it has not yet been seen on the north coast, while on the other hand it is as generally distributed over the whole of the southern portion of that vast continent, the islands in Bass's Straits, and the still more southern country of Van Diemen's Land, wherever there are rivers, estuaries of the sea, lagoons, and pools of water of any extent; in some instances it occurs in such numbers that flocks of many hundreds may be seen together, particularly on those arms of the sea which, after passing the beach-line of the coast, expand into great sheets of shallow water, on which the birds are seldom disturbed either by the force of boisterous winds or the intrusions of the natives. In the white man, however, wherever the country has been brought under his dominion, the Black Swan finds an enemy so deadly, that in many parts where it was formerly numerous it has become almost, if not entirely, extirpated; and this has been particularly the case on some of the large rivers of Van Diemen's Land, such as the Derwent, &c.; but in the salt lagoons and inlets of D'Entrecasteaux' Channel, the little-frequented bays of the southern and western shores of Van Diemen's Land, the entrance to Melbourne Harbour at Port Philip, Spencer's and St. Vincent's Gulfs in South Australia, the Clarence, MacLeay and other rivers northward of the Hunter in New South Wales, the Black Swan is still as numerous as ever, and so will continue until its territories are invaded by civilized man, when as a natural consequence its numbers will immediately diminish. One most destructive mode by which vast numbers are annually destroyed is that of chasing the parent birds in a boat at the time they shed their primary quill-feathers, when being unable to fly they are soon rowed down and captured; this practice, which is much to be regretted, is usually resorted to for the sake of the beautiful down with which the breast of the bird is clothed, but not unfrequently in mere wantonness. I have heard of the boats of a whaler entering an estuary and returning to the ship, nearly filled with Black Swans destroyed in this manner.

In disposition, unless molested, or its precincts intruded upon, it is as tame, gentle and harmless as it is graceful and ornamental in appearance, and as it readily becomes domesticated there are few of the aviaries of Europe which are adorned with its presence. When flying it forms a most conspicuous object, the white of the wings offering a strong contrast to the black colouring of its body and the green herbage bounding the scene in which it is disporting.

The breeding-season commences in October and continues to the middle of January; I procured newly-hatched young clothed in greyish white down at South Port River on the 31st of December, and I took five newly-laid eggs on Flinder's Island in Bass's Straits on the 13th of January. The nest is of a large size, composed of flags and other herbage, and generally placed on an isolated island. The eggs are from five to eight in number, of a pale green, stained all over with buffy brown, four and a half inches long by two inches and three-quarters broad.

The whole of the plumage brownish black, the under surface paler than the upper; the feathers of the back tipped with greyish brown; primaries and secondaries pure white; bill beautiful pinky scarlet, crossed near the tip with a broad band of white; the extremities of both mandibles are also white; irides scarlet; eyelash and lores pinky scarlet; feet black.

The Plate represents the bird about half the natural size.